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The Distinction of Ornament and Decoration in Architecture

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ABSTRACT

Ornament has been present throughout the recorded history, revealing human's aspirations, reflections and imaginations. Correspondingly, the discussion of ornament has almost uninterruptedly been a major topic for architectural discourses; one which has led to the publication of several significant texts in which ornamental practices has been addressed from a variety of perspectives. An investigation into the key architectural texts however, reveals that the absence of a certain definition of ornament and its functions in architecture as well as the interchangeable use of the terms 'decoration' and ornament as synonyms, have always been a serious obstacle to reach a clear conception of ornament nature . In this regard, the present paper attempted to distinguish between 'ornament' and 'decoration' based on a comparative analysis of the scholars' accounts and the way the terms were employed in the architectural texts. Results indicated that the aforementioned concepts can be distinguished by means of seven criteria including components, connection, reference source, role, field of application and reference mode. According to the most referred criteria, ornament is an essential part of architecture which creates a firm bonding with its carrier and often fulfills functions more than aesthetic one .It is mostly made up of transformed motifs and evokes natural forces that originate deeply beyond or within the body of building. Decoration on the other hand, is a pleasing arrangement of real things; a suggestion of the decorous which does not have a permanent connection with its carrier. It is also purely representational, due to its reference to external matters such as mythology, religion, history, or cultural practice.

Keywords: Architecture, Criteria, Decoration, Distinction, Ornament.

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1. Introduction

Ornament has been present in the western world throughout recorded time, revealing human desires, activities and beliefs (Abercrombie, 1990; Brolin, 1985; Focillon, 1948; Grombrich, 1979). It has emerged as a result of the human being existence and his urge for relating to his environment through adding

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qualitative features to objects, alongside their quantitative states. (Saglam, 2014) Not surprisingly, the discussion of ornament and its role has been addressed in the very first architectural treatises (i.e. 'Ten Books on Architecture' (15 BC)) and persisted uninterruptedly into the 21 century debates. During the recent decades in particular, this subject has received an unprecedented attention from scholars which is partly because of the technological advancement took place in the field of building design and construction technologies. These achievements has provided a brilliant opportunity for cheaper, faster and high quality production of new generation of ornaments which challenges modernist arguments against such practices (Mitrache, 2012). Parallel to such developments, several scholarly texts has been published in which the nature and function of ornament and the necessity of its presence in architecture has been re- examined from a variety of perspectives. An investigation into this literature however, implies that there is no consensus among the writers regarding the definition of ornament .In fact, the range of given description of its nature and function are so wide which makes it difficult to achieve a clear understanding of the concept. This ambiguity is partly because ornament – like the profession of architecture – possesses a multifaceted nature which resist any precise definition (Balik & Allmer, 2016; Bothireddy, 2007). It may also be due to the flux in its characterization, position and associative meanings over the ages and the interchangeable use of closely related words such as ornament, decoration and adornment which offer slightly different meanings. Such undisciplined application of the aforementioned terms however, has been questioned by some scholars (Bloomer, 2006; Carlson-Reddig, 1996; Trilling, 2003) since the second half of 20th century; when the rise of post modernism brought ornament back to the center of attention in the architectural discourses. These critics claimed that ornament and decoration are neither synonymous nor interchangeable and proposed –a number of criteria allowing for their distinction to be made. Discussing the common elements underlying their seemingly different criteria in order to reach a consensus on this matter is one of the aims of this paper, which is conducted through comparative analysis methods.

It is notable that the theoretical framework of this paper is presented in three parts. At first, the terms 'ornament' and 'decoration' are analyzed etymologically and their meanings in ancient Greek and Latin language are examined. Then, an investigation into the way they are employed in some of classic architectural treatises are conducted and finally those argument which directly addressed the distinction of two aforementioned concepts are comparatively analyzed as an auxiliary method to reach a conclusion in this regard.

It is expected that the criteria and definitions resulted from this research, would led scholars to make a certain distinction between ornamental and decorative elements, and to avoid the interchangeable use of the terms in their works. The results also will probably pave the way for restoring ornament position in architecture, by reasonably disapproving modernism arguments against them as secondary, temporary and useless objects.

1.1 Methodology

This paper examines some of major English lexicons and architectural texts to find the distinctions of two closely related concepts, i.e. ornament and decoration. In this regard, writers' direct and indirect definitions of the aforementioned concepts and their views regarding their difference are collected and codified. It is notable that 'Coding' as one of the most important methods of qualitative data analysis (Habib et al., 2012) is employed in this paper for facilitating the calculation of codes (i.e. criteria) frequency and identification of most referred ones. Based on this method, those codes which is less mentioned by scholars, are eliminated and others are analytically compared to reach a conclusion regarding ornament and decoration distinction.

2. Ornament and decoration: an etymological analysis

Ornament - derived from Old French 'ornament' and Latin 'Ornamentum' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2016) - is defined in English lexicons as "A useful accessory that lends grace or beauty" (Merriam Webster,

2016) and "A thing used or serving to make something look more attractive but usually having no practical purpose" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2017). Decoration on the other hand, is a derivation of Late Latin 'Decoracionem' (The Free Dictionary, 2016), which means "The act, process, technique, or art of decorating"; "Something used to decorate, especially when put up temporarily to celebrate or call attention to a special occasion" (American Heritage Dictionary, 2017) and "An emblem of honor, such as a medal or badge" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2017).

What the above-mentioned statements share is that both concepts (i.e. decoration and ornament) refer to additional elements whose main role are beautifying and glorifying their carriers. The difference however, emerges where OED definition of 'ornament' implicitly recognized its capability of fulfilling practical purposes while there are not such cues in decoration descriptions. Moreover, Decorative elements are mostly introduced as temporary objects whose dignifying impression is a result of exhibiting local conventions regarding propriety, good taste and good manner (Decorum) and not necessarily their beautiful form.

It is also notable that the Latin roots of ornament, decoration and adornment-, share "or" relating back to order. In order to prove such a relation, Kumara Swamy did an etymological analysis, whose result showed that "The Greek roots for the word ornament are Kosmeo, from which comes 'cosmetic', and Kosmos or cosmos; an ordering that is the opposite of chaos" (Shriver, 2014) Based upon this, he concluded that "ornament has an ordering function, tied also to a connection with the divine order of the universe" (Shriver, 2014); A claim which was supported by Kent Bloomer description of ornament function: "Ornament situate mundane things within a world of eternal motions and forces in other word; Their function is to embed part of cosmos into a concrete things thus becoming a site for the complexity of cosmic forces to be visually represented." (Tamboukou, 2016)

3. Ornament and decoration in architectural literature

Several scholars throughout the history attempted to define ornament and make its distinction from similar concepts such as decoration or adornment clear. Due to the multifaceted nature of ornaments however, most of their efforts were unfruitful. As Leon Battista Alberti hesitantly noted- in *De Re Aedificatoria* (1450) "The precise nature of beauty and ornament, and the difference between them, the mind could perhaps visualize more clearly than my words could explain." (Alberti, 1988) And John Summerson, when attempting to distinguish ornament from finer manipulations occur in classical columns...eventually concluded that "perhaps it is best not to define." (Farrell, 2005) Despite of such desperate statements, there exist some helpful statements in western literature which are as follows: Isidore of Seville, (7 AD) stated that "the Greeks compared their word 'cosmos' to the Latin word 'ornament' because the beauty of ornament was manifested in the motions of the heavenly bodies; what suggests that ornament presented visual attributes of physical activity circulating in the 'world-at-large' in a place that is external or within the microcosm of the body being ornamented" (Bloomer & Kresten Jespersen, 2014). Decoration by comparison, according to Vitruvius (25 B.C.), is related to propriety which is implicated with the 'decorum'. (Bloomer & Kresten Jespersen, 2014) A distinction, ignored by himself in his book '*De Architectura*', Where he used the terms 'ornament' (or its two Close variants, adornment and ornamental) and decoration (or decorative) confusingly in reference to a wide range of objects including two dimensional (paintings, frescos) and three-dimensional (sculptural); interior and exterior additions. (Farrell 2005)

It is notable that "the ancient Greek linkage of 'cosmos' to ornament persisted through the Middle Ages, albeit subject to being viewed through the lens of the medieval quadrivium." (Bloomer & Kresten Jespersen, 2014) This approach however, changed during the renaissance period when Alberti - for the first time- suggested the idea of ornament as something attached to beauty (i.e. attached to the harmonic proportions that constituted the beautiful) (Bloomer & Kresten Jespersen, 2014)

In his seminal book called '*De re Aedificatoria*', the term 'decoration' was absent While ornament was used much more freely. "Vitruvius used the word 'ornament' relatively sparingly in his text and never

refers to an entire capital or capital as an ornament.... In fact, the largest architectural element Vitruvius refers to as ornament was an entablature, but he only allowed himself to do this once; In 'De re Aedificatoria' however, something interesting happens that begins a trend in an escalation of the scale of what architects call 'ornament'. For Vitruvius, there were 'The Ornaments of the Orders', but for Alberti the orders are the ornaments of architecture (Farrell, 2005) "In the whole art of building the column is the principal ornament without any doubt." (Alberti, 1988) "It is not only the orders which Alberti considers to be ornament, everything beyond the rough brick structural walls of building is called ornament: paintings, frescoes, revetment, flooring, sculptures, reliefs, pilasters, and, most interestingly, openings (windows, niches and doors) which could be considered as the first negative ornaments" (Farrell, 2005); What conflicts his own definition of ornament as an additive.

Such irregularities in the usage of the term ornament also exist in Palladio's book, 'The Four Books on Architecture' in which He used the word in reference to not only architectural objects of different scales but also to non –architectural elements such as arches, trees, road and bridges; what obscures his conception of the term definition. Regarding this, Richard Schofield – the book translator-writes:

"Ornament is used on literally dozens of occasions by Palladio; sometimes it is clear that the word is focused or 'loaded' in the sense that it refers to Albertian theories to the effect that columns, capitals, bases, pilasters, doors, and windows were ornaments... We are not sure, however, whether Palladio intended this word to carry a theoretical weight on every occasion; this question need not affect the translation a great deal since the word can be translated as 'ornament' in many cases, but there are occasions when 'decoration' or other words would serve better." (Palladio – Translator's note, 2002).

During the mid-eighteenth century, into the heartland of the enlightenment, ornament almost was expelled from the lexicon of reasonable thought while decoration" dominated the architectural discussion; a privilege partly resulted from the biased discussion of decoration by the powerful French academic Jacques François Blonde in Diderot's Encyclopedia. This However changed in the nineteenth century when the term 'ornament' reenters the academy and an explosion of knowledge about the subjects of ornament and decoration took place in the sixty years between the publication of Jones's seminal Grammar in 1856 and Alfred Hamlin's History of Ornament in 1916.

In all of these textbook writers wrestled with the distinction between ornament and decoration (Bloomer & Kresten Jespersen, 2014); concepts whose clarification seemed to be urgent for architects due to the threatening rise of interior design as a competitive profession in the 19th century (Farrell, 2005). Nevertheless, no consensus was reached among scholars and the confusion persisted into the 20th century. Following the second half of the 20 century however, a more resolute interest in defining this distinction was formed among scholars which led to the suggestion of some criteria in this regard; those which could be loosely classified into 7 groups as follow.

4. The criteria of ornament and decoration distinction

It seems that there exists only three texts in western architectural literature (Trilling 2003), Bloomer (2006) and Carlson-Redding (1998) whose focus is solely to clarify ornament and decoration distinction and other given statements are mostly sketchy and secondary comments in the texts with other topics. Unfortunately, some of the views put forward in the aforementioned texts are conflicting at some points and have not been supported by proper reasoning; what hinders a clear understanding of the concepts and necessitates further investigations in this regard. For these, an exhaustive examination of those architectural texts which addressed this distinction was conducted by authors and 25 key comments were resulted (Table 1). Content analysis of these comments base on coding method indicates that scholars distinguished between ornament and decoration mainly through seven criteria which will be discussed in this section.

Table 1: The main criteria of ornament and decoration distinction in scholars'

							Criteria
Application	Reference Mode	Components	Role	Connection	Necessity	Subject Matter	Scholars
							Repton & Loudon (1840)
							Brandlhuber (1972)
							Grabar(1973)
							Carlson-Redding(1996)
							Harries(1998)
							Moughtin&Tiesdell (1999)
							Engels-Schwartspaul (2001)
							Philip(2003)
							Trilling(2003)
							Pontius(2003)
							Farrell(2005)
							Gaunt(2005)
							Moussavi & Kubo(2006)
							McNicholas (2006)
							Bloomer(2006)
							Hazari& Watkins(2006)
							Skensved (2007)
							Domeisen (In Small,2009)
							Burgoin (In Small,2009)
							Rice(In Small,2009)
							Harries(2009)
							Massey(2013)
							Kahn(2013)
							Necipoğlu & Payne(2016)
							Peterson(2016)
2	6	7	17	11	2	12	Variable frequency

Source: Authors

4.1 Reference source / subject matter

“Ornaments and decoration are not the true subjects of architecture, but rather secondary referential vehicles for representing subject matters such as nature, iconography, mythology, religion, ritual, history, or cultural practice which are external to building” (Carlson-Redding, 1998). In doing so however, ornaments are considered “impurely representational” (Ibid), as their necessity for bonding with the building and further re-presenting its structure, purposes and programmatic issues (Repton, 1840; Hazari & Watkins, 2006), demand their dependence and compromise, while decorations are absolutely representational.”



Figure 1: (a) Left. The Château de Fontainebleau, Fontainebleau, France (Trilling 2003); (b) Right. Aljaferia palace, 11th Century, Zaragoza, Spain

Another similar account regard this criteria belongs to Kent Bloomer who asserted that decoration "implies a pleasing arrangement of things and a suggestion of the decorous, marked by propriety, good taste, good conduct, and good appearance" (Skensved, 2007) (Figure 2), while ornament evoke natural forces that originate deeply beyond (in the cosmos) or deeply within (the micro cosmos) of a body (Bloomer & Kresten Jespersen, 2014) (Figure 1). A difference which is also implicitly addressed by Farshid

Moussavi and Mikael Kubo in their book 'Function of Ornament'; where they described Ornament as “the figure that emerges from the material substrate, the expression of embedded forces through processes of construction, assembly and growth” and distinguished it from decoration which communicates through a common language. (Moussavi & Kubo, 2006)



Figure 2. Ornament as integrated with structure, dual arc (Karbandi), Nobahar Bathhouse, Tabriz, Iran

4.2 Necessity

As mentioned earlier, Decoration and ornament are defined in English lexicons as elements added to their carrier for the sake of beautification; what renders them as something secondary hence, inessential (Ahani & Etesam, 2015). Such conception of ornament as dispensable part of architecture however, is questioned by some scholars. They argue that ornament—unlike decoration - enhances its carrier and completes it (Grabar, 1992) by communicating meanings and (sometimes) fulfilling a practical purpose; Functions which makes them an essential part of the architecture.

Moreover, Ornament makes human feel at home in the world by fulfilling an animating function which comes through endowing spirit to its carrier; while decoration are experienced as just an aesthetic addendum, which loses this aura.

4.3 Component

During the second half of 19th century, several textbooks was published in which ornament was introduced as element whose fundamental characteristic was “the distribution, by repetition, of a nucleus comprised of a rather small set of basic figures” (Bloomer & Kresten Jespersen, 2014) (figure 3). From this perspective, all ornaments are “made up of generative figures that are repetitively distributed into a finite portion of the decorated body to evoke natural cycles, efflorescence and transformation (Bloomer, 2006). Thus, “for something to be called ornament, the existence of the motif which can be as simple as a square or as complex as a flower is essential” (Pontius 2003). Decorations however, do not necessarily follow any universal formal rules (Brandlhuber, 1972) as their function is “to manifest local good taste and the manners held by a particular constituency” (Bloomer & Kresten Jespersen, 2014) Through a pleasing arrangement of mostly real things such as furniture.



Figure 3. (a) Repetitive motifs in ornaments- Sheikh Lotfollah mosque, Isfahan, Iran; (b) Louis Sullivan's Wainwright Building (1901) St. Louis

4.4 Connection/ permanence

Some scholars claim that ornament makes a strong physical and symbolic bonding with its carrier, while decoration necessitates no mutual dependence or compromise between the building and its adornments (Carlson-Redding, 1998); Ornament refers to relatively permanent elements; while decoration usually denotes a more evanescent form of ornament used for rituals festivals, and the like, or for surface embellishment. it (decoration) “implies extravagance of little consequence and can be changed easily” (Matthew McNicholas, 2006) (Figure 5 below).

On the contrary, ornament “exists in a permanent and bonded condition with the building and is



Figure 4. (a) Ornament bonding with building- Louis Sullivan's Wainwright Building (1901) St. Louis, Missouri; (b) Flags, flowerboxes and umbrellas as front door decorations of a hotel in Canada

incapable of separation without significant loss to the presence, significance, and use, as well as their ability to express of the object and the building itself” (Carlson-Redding, 1998) (Figure 4 above). Ornament “implies purpose and celebration of function as well as gravity of position” (McNicholas, 2006). “It has a syntactic relationship to that which it ornaments as well as all of its other parts” (Peterson, 2016).



Figure 5. (a)John Lewis Department Store, Leicester, England; (b) Nazi eagle on the wall as decoration, Oslo

Based on such arguments, ornament is usually introduced as the adoration of joints (Kahn, 2013) and an integral part of ornamented objects (Grabar, 1992), unlike decoration which is simply applied” (Kahn, 2013); an afterthought (Philip, 2003) and a superficial and trivial application of elements, in both architecture and objects (Necipoğlu and Payne, 2016)

4.5 Role /purpose

While most scholars (Trilling, 2003; Brandlhuber, 1972; Azari & Watkins, 2006) share the idea that decoration is a broader term that includes specific manifestations such as ornament, pattern, etc., there are two opposing viewpoints among them regarding the role of ornament and decoration in architecture. Some scholars (Harries, 1998; Brandlhuber, 1972) believe that decorative elements solely play an aesthetic role while ornaments have an implicit potential for signification and usually articulates a communal ethos (Harries, 1998); what intends to provoke further thoughts.

There are however, a greater number of scholars who believe that the aforementioned concepts can have both aesthetic and semantic functions but “Ornament is decoration in which the visual pleasure of form significantly outweighs the communicative value of content” (Trilling, 2003). A viewpoint, implicitly supported by Moussavi and Kubo in 'Function of Ornament'(2006); where they claim that decoration produces “communication” and ornament create “affects and resonance”. (Moussavi & Kubo, 2006)

4.6 Reference mode

“The idea of reference is suggestive not only of sources, but further of the reference modes” (Carlson-Reddig, 1996)'; a criteria upon which, Domeisen attempted to clarify ornament and decoration distinction. He claims that decoration are the distribution of 'real' (true) objects for aesthetic purposes while ornament is abstract, a transformation, and not truth (Small, 2009) (figure 1&2); this is a distinction, approved by Kent bloomer definition of ornament as metamorphosis (Bloomer, 2000) (Figure 6) and exemplified by Pierce Rice; where he wrote “Rinceaux are ornament; a figure relief is decoration” (Ibid)



Figure 6. (a)Transformation in ornaments-Grotesque mask, Birmingham cathedral west Midlands, UK; (b) figural representation as decoration-statue of Jesus Christ, Herz-Jesu Church, Cologne, 1902

4.7 Field of application

There are a limited number of accounts which distinguish between ornament and decoration according to their field of application. Gavin Farrell for example, believes that “Ornament has acquired a slightly more ‘architectural’ connotation, while ‘decoration’ is something often restricted for interiors.” (Farrell 2005) a viewpoint which is aligned with the definitions put forward in English lexicons; where decoration is usually associated with the stage furnishings.

Another account regarding this criteria is suggested by Moughtin & Tiesdell who compared Decoration as element that “has everyday associations... to Ornament that has more formal overtone... associated with certain architectural styles of the work of individual architects”. (Moughtin & Tiesdell, 1999)

Table 2: The main criteria for ornament and decoration distinction

Criteria	Ornament	Decoration
Subject Matter	Outer/inner subject Nature realm/ <i>Ornamentum</i>	Outer subject Human realm (society)/Decorous
Necessity	Essential	Inessential
Connection	Bonded	Portable
Role	1 st viewpoint 2 nd viewpoint	Aesthetic Aesthetic & Semantic Superiority of Aesthetic role
Components	Motif	-
Reference Mode	Impurely representational Mostly Abstract Transformed	Representational Figurative Real
Application	Formal Overtone Exterior aspect of architecture	Everyday Associations Interior Spaces

Source: Authors

5. Discussion and conclusion

Due to the absence of clear definitions of 'ornament' and 'decoration' in architecture, this paper attempted to clarify their nature and distinctions through the etymological examination of the aforementioned terms and the comparative analysis of western scholars' accounts. Results indicated that despite the lack of consensus among theorists regarding this issue, some criteria were suggested in architectural text which could be loosely classified into 7 groups including Reference Source, connection, component, reference mode, necessity, role and field of application.

It is notable that some of the writers arguments are based on personal interpretations and lack acceptable reasoning; for example, it is claimed by Farrell (2005) that ornament and decoration are respectively related with outdoor and interior spaces while one could think of several interior-based ornaments or outdoor decorations. Moreover, there are many examples of ornaments with cultural associations which challenges the statements Regarding the 7th and 4th criteria (i.e. field of application and subject matter). There also exist contrary positions toward some criteria (for instance ornament and decoration role) which hinder reaching a consensus, since such conflicting views could led to completely different results when assessing an object.

The most commonly agreed accounts however, share the view that ornament is an essential part of architecture which creates a firm bonding with its carrier and often fulfills functions more than aesthetic one .It is mostly made up of transformed motifs and evokes natural forces that originate deeply beyond or deeply within the body of building. Decoration however, is a pleasing arrangement of real things and a suggestion of the decorous which does not have a permanent connection with its carrier. It is purely representational due to its reference to matters such as iconography, mythology, religion, ritual & history, external to building and does not follow any universal formal laws.

Based on the aforementioned distinction, modernist arguments against ornament as secondary, temporary and dispensable part of architectural practices could be challenged; since such critiques- according to the findings of this research- is only applicable to some of decorative elements. In this regard, a revision of architects' approach toward the ornamental practices and a more careful application of terms 'ornament' and' decoration in architectural literature, is anticipated which has been somehow started during the recent years.

This paper also suggests two further areas for future investigations, including a comparative analysis of the nature and function of ornamental and decorative elements in western and non-western architecture which is expected to result in a broader insight into their distinctions as well as an examination of other closely-related concepts such as pattern, adornment, embellishment, Whose definitions and distinctions have rarely been addressed in architectural texts.

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